

Visual Art Network – AGM 9 October 2024

Chair's Report (October 2024 – September 2025)

VAN Gallery Exhibitions, Sales and Footfall

We've had a rich and varied schedule of themed exhibitions this year, complimented by an imaginative array of members' work in the artists' boards and makers' space areas. Personally, I think some of the recent exhibitions have been amongst the best I have seen in my time as a Trustee and we continue to receive very positive feedback from visitors both verbally and as comments in the Visitors' Book. Here are some examples of what people have written in there:

'A brilliant place'

'Varied and interesting as usual'

'Lovely artwork, had to get a piece to take back to Australia'

'It's so nice to have a space to see local artists – a beautiful space'

It has been a good year for sales and footfall. As at the end of September we are just over £3500 up on the same point last year and our footfall is over a thousand higher than the end of September last year. It's hard to know for certain but we are reasonably confident that the increases are in part due to our improved focus on marketing which I will return to later.

Actions We Have Taken This Year

There were three suggestions in last year's membership survey that we wanted to implement:

- Creating more exhibition space by replacing the wall-mounted card displays at the front of the gallery with free standing, rotating displays and by removing the wooden slats at the rear of the gallery. We have done this.
- Creating an online form to be completed when members submit work for exhibiting in the gallery. We looked into this and concluded that it was going to be too complicated and difficult to achieve.
- Generating more professional looking exhibition labels from the information provided in the online form. We have implemented this using the information provided by email rather than an online form and we are very grateful to Julie Goldthorpe initially and Suki White more recently for creating the labels that enable our exhibitions to have a more professional appearance.

Partly based on feedback from the Membership Survey we also identified a number of other areas where we wanted to improve. One of these was to expand our marketing and publicity activities and to this end we set up the Marketing and Publicity Working Group.

As a result of this:

- We are now posting more frequently and regularly on Instagram with different members of the group taking turns to post, which creates some interesting diversity in style
- We have a poster in the gallery with a QR code encouraging people to follow us on Instagram and we are now up to 1412 followers

- My Shrewsbury online magazine is publishing a blog about each of our exhibitions throughout the year and posting about them on their socials
- Shropshire Star are also covering our exhibitions thanks to contributions from My Shrewsbury and David Holmes from the Marketing and Publicity Working Group
- As a member of Supporting All Artists (SAA), Alison Wragg was able to get an advert about our 'Faces We Love' exhibition in the summer edition of the SAA Magazine
- Tracey Hill arranged for us to have coverage of our exhibitions through Shrewsbury Scoop
- We are in the Shrewsbury Town Guide and Town Map again this year and will be in the Town Guide again next year.

Another area we identified as in need of attention was the basement, so we hired a skip and had a massive clear-out, later improving the storage down there by adding more shelving to accommodate 3D items.

Promoting VAN Through Participation in Events

As part of promoting VAN through participation in events we had a stall at the Battlefield 1403 (Farm Shop) Christmas Taster Evening and Market on 21st November and another one at the Condover Hall Christmas Fair on 1st December. The Condover event was particularly successful, and we will be doing that again this year on Sunday 7 December.

Following a suggestion from Pete Fricker at last year's AGM we also sponsored a tree at the St. Chad's Christmas Tree Festival with decorations made by our members. Apparently, over 10,000 people visited the festival.

We had a stall at the Made in Shropshire Artisan Market in August. This was reasonably successful, although we did end up spending more time trying to prevent our gazebo from blowing away than we did engaging with customers.

Shrewsbury Arts Trail

We once again sponsored Shrewsbury Arts Trail and were a participating venue. During the Trail, our August sales and footfall figures were particularly good, taking over £2500 in the gallery, our highest figure of the year and we had 1060 visitors to the gallery.

Community Project Fund

As agreed at the last AGM we sponsored Shrewsbury Arts Trail and the English Bridge Workshops 40th Anniversary Events. The third project we were planning to sponsor, a Schools Art Project Competition, never got off the ground because, in spite of the work that Gisela Robinson and Colin Rose did in promoting it, no schools came forward to participate in the competition.

We have two nominations for community projects this year, Shrewsbury Arts Trail and the Wellbeing Art Group which is run at English Bridge Studios by the Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation.

Acknowledgements

The Visual Art Network is unique in that it is entirely run by volunteers. The Trustees are all volunteers, the gallery is staffed by volunteers and volunteers help out in numerous other ways so as this is my last Chair's Report I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the members who have made tremendous contributions to the organisation this year, starting with the gallery volunteers. The gallery is our main source of income and with operating costs continuing to rise it is important that we are open every day that we are due to be open. We have had 76 different members doing shifts in the gallery since January and I'm not going to list them all here, but I would like to mention the ones that have done the most shifts and that's:

In joint 8th place with 15 shifts each are Alison Wragg, Brian Churm, Judi Willerton, Lindley Fallon, Monica Silver, Pete Fricker and Sandra Lane.

In joint 6th place with 16 shifts each are Jackie Corfield and Lena Jarl Churm.

In 5th place with 17 shifts we have Elena Wilkes.

In joint 3rd place with 20 shifts each are John Ball and Leona Thomas.

In 2nd place with 21 shifts is Reg Lewis and our leading gallery volunteer with 23 shifts, that's nearly 3 a month is Isabel Bradley. I'd also like to mention Isabella Rizzo who has done 13 shifts despite only joining us in June. Other members who have made significant contributions throughout the year are:

Jasmine Sara – who has been involved in virtually every exhibition changeover, initially leading them when she was there for all 3 days and more recently helping out with the more strenuous task of carrying artwork up and downstairs on the Saturday afternoon. Jasmine has been ably assisted by a whole host of volunteers the most regular ones being Jackie Corfield, Reg Lewis, Anne Bremridge, David Holmes, Alison Wragg, Dave Thompson, Julie Goldthorpe, Isabel Bradley, Trixi Hill and myself.

Other noteworthy contributions have come from Pat Simon- who took over the task of producing the Newsletter, William Lee who designs our excellent exhibition posters, Gisela Robinson who creates the painted designs on the gallery window, Trixi Hill who has played a major part in the expansion of our social media curation and Owen Carter who provides technical support.

Finally, I'd like to thank my fellow Trustees who work extremely hard behind the scenes to keep the organisation running smoothly.

Julie does a tremendous job looking after everything related to membership as well as co-ordinating our exhibitions and organising our participation in events like Condover Christmas Fair and she will be taking on the role of Chair following this AGM.

Dave, who recently took on the role of Treasurer, also has the thankless task of monitoring the gallery volunteer rota to try and ensure that the gallery remains open.

Alison, has performed the Secretary role extremely well since joining the Management Committee at the last AGM and has assisted in many other ways and until recently Janice, as Treasurer, was responsible for making sure that artists were paid on time for the work they had sold.

Not-for-profit arts organisations like ours are extremely important because they provide a low-cost platform to enable local artists and makers to exhibit and sell their work. I know that many of our members had never exhibited before they joined VAN and I well remember the boost to my own self-confidence that I received when I sold my first piece of work in the gallery, so I get a kick out of hearing about other's excitement at having their work exhibited and making their first sale.

I'm a passionate believer in the value of the arts to individuals and society and I'm delighted to have had an opportunity to play a part in promoting the visual arts through the activities of VAN and to have made many new artist friends along the way.

I've enjoyed my time as a Trustee and take pride in the way that the organisation has grown and developed over the last 7 years. I'm confident that the current team, joined by our new Trustees will continue to take the organisation forward for the benefit of our members and the wider community.